William Uhler Hensel Prize  
March 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2016

Anh Nguyen '16  
Originally submitted for Professor Mueller  
ENG461: Swift, Blake, and Satire Fall 2015
“Rent from Eternity”: William Blake’s Dualistic Unity

“I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul.
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is,”

-- Walt Whitman, Song of Myself

William Blake’s creation myth, as presented in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and The [First] Book of Urizen, emerges from separation and fragmentation. The severance of Los from Urizen, of Enitharmon from Los, and within Urizen himself lays the foundation for the myth while satirizing the Biblical Creation and deconstructing Blake’s myth itself. Unlike in the Book of Genesis where Creation occurs thanks to the essential compartmentalization of all things into their rightful places, separation in Blake’s world generates chaos and impedes progress. He protests against the separation of soul and body, the dichotomy of reason and desire, and the Biblical hierarchy of God and man. However, even while Blake argues for unity and interconnectedness within one being and acknowledgement of the dual existence of Reason and Imagination, division in his myth is still an event which needs to take place no matter how he eschews it. The necessity of division creates a paradox wherein the dualism that division entails is indispensable to the unity for which Blake ultimately advocates. This paper will examine the different instances in The Marriage and Urizen when Blake walks the tentative line between monoism and dualism in his parodies of Biblical institutions and structures, his treatment of the physical body, and his contemplation of ontological issues. The intrinsic contradiction in Blake’s account of creation also extends to his own image found in Los, the “Eternal Prophet” and artistic soul, who understands that the creation of a work of art necessitates differentiation between ideas and endures all the torment that follows.
Through parodying Biblical concepts and progressions in both *The Marriage* and *Urizen*, Blake points out the harmful hypocrisies that the Bible perpetrates regarding the hierarchical dualism between good and evil, God and man. According to Christopher Rowland, author of “Blake and ‘The Bible of Hell’,” Blake “questions the received wisdom of Christian orthodoxy concerning the authoritative status of the Bible and demonstrates its negative effects” in his creation myth (86). *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in particular, deconstructs this “received wisdom” from its very title. In the Christian account of the world, heaven and hell are polar opposites; heaven epitomizes light and holiness, the destination for pure, innocent souls while hell represents darkness and damnation. Marriage itself is an integral notion in Christianity, with its own implications of power (im)balance between the partners. To join “heaven” and “hell” in “marriage”, then, is both transgressive and foreshadowing as to what the work sets out to do. *The Marriage* satirizes the Christian institution of marriage by bringing together two opposite states of being, and taking away the value hierarchy that has been imposed upon them. Indeed, the true problem with this Christian dualism does not only lie in its differentiating of states, but its favoring of one over the other. Blake’s union, then, seeks to be not merely a union of differences, but that of equals. Such a union can be fruitful for individuals should they open their minds to it, as “Blake regards both heaven and hell as fundamental modes of human experience […] Rejection of one of these means rejecting part of oneself and as a result ending up being impoverished and living a life of distortion and even destruction” (Rowland 88). Even if separation is already in place, as is the case with heaven and hell, people will be best served at least attempting to “unite” them by treating them with the equal regard that they deserve.

The “proverbs of Hell”, inscribed by Blake in *The Marriage*, mirror the form of the Wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, but satirize it with self-contradictory statements that
make much broader claims about life than the Biblical proverbs ever do. Rowland asserts that the
aphorisms in the Bible “are not constructed upon abstraction but the result of observation of
‘minute particulars’,” meaning they are written as advice to young men on practical matters such
as maintaining order and propriety in a world full of temptations (89). Meanwhile, the proverbs
in *The Marriage* are diverse in both tone and meaning, a mix of common advice such as “The
best wine is the oldest, the best water the newest” (*MHH* 37) or “The most sublime act is to put
another before you” (*MHH* 36) with other abstract, elusive statements like “the fox condemns the
trap, not himself” and “Eternity is in love with the production of time” (*MHH* 36). Blake
parodies the “wisdom” of the Bible of Heaven in his “Bible of Hell” to convey wisdom he deems
more important, more universal, simultaneously pointing out the one-sidedness of the guidance
in the Bible itself. He even addresses religion directly in this section, associating “holy” values
with the deadly sins and people who are usually deemed “base”:

Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.
The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.
The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.
The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.
The nakedness of the woman is the work of God. (*MHH* 36)

Denouncing religion so deliberately by putting it in conjunction with those which it condemns
the most, in a direct parody of the Bible’s Wisdom literature, demonstrates Blake’s intent to
satirize what the Bible and Christianity advocate. He shows that “good” and “evil” are not so
cleanly divided, that the ideas religion upholds and those it opposes often overlap, or indeed,
feed off of each other. Once again, Blake molds monoism out of a preexisting dualism,
transgressing the dominant mindset of separation between good and bad by depicting their
intimate connection.
If the "proverbs of Hell" are a straightforward parody of the Biblical Wisdom literature, then *The [First] Book of Urizen* is a more subtle satire of the Biblical *Genesis*, as well as Blake's own account of creation as inspired by the Bible (Rowland 99). *Urizen* is laden with references and parallels to the Bible's Creation story in ways that criticize its portrayal of divinity while constructing Blake's own version of the myth. Rowland sees *Urizen* as a total deconstruction of the conventional interpretation of the Bible, from its depiction of creation as a "divine" ordering of things to its espousal of a sole, isolated, benevolent power entity. The established reading of *Genesis* as representing "eternal laws" in its description of God creating all things in a certain grouping and order "is a false religion masquerading as truth" (Rowland 99). The disorder of *Urizen’s* Creation story, according to him, should "remind readers of the biblical books that any neat story line is less obvious than appears at first sight" (Rowland 99). Urizen himself represents the harm of "a life turned in on itself", as his self-imposed isolation from the other Eternals and the rest of existence turns against him (Rowland 100). He turns out not to be a benevolent God but a tyrannical leader looking to "impose order on the world" (Rowland 102). Blake satirizes the monarchist rhetoric by directly putting their language through Urizen's voice as he declares the philosophy of his "rule":

Laws of peace, of love, unity:
Of pity, compassion, and forgiveness.
Let each chuse one habitation:
His ancient infinite mansion:
One command, one joy, one desire,
One curse, one weight, one measure
One King, one God, one Law. (*Urizen* 72)

By telling the story of Urizen as such, Blake criticizes the view that the Bible supports a "remote, self-contained divinity"; what he understands of the Bible, instead, is a continuity of
relationships within oneself and from one to others, which will lead to a holy existence (Rowland 100). In this light, then, Rowland believes that Blake does not oppose the Bible itself but the standard interpretation of it, which itself serves to maintain the ideological power of reigning political and religious authorities.

Rowland’s argument that The [First] Book of Urizen is Blake’s criticism of the Biblical support for “One King, one God, one Law” and its negative effects on his society’s values is not without merit and well supported with evidence from the original text; however, it lacks a recognition of the complexities in Blake’s juxtaposition and subsequent meanings. Blake does set out to debunk Urizen as the “one God,” but the creation of the world in his myth still depends upon separation and fragmentation within Urizen himself: “Times on times he divided, & measur’d/Space by space in his ninefold darkness” (Urizen 70). The event of separation between Urizen and Los, in particular, is significant both in the context of the myth as well as of Blake’s hermeneutic. On the one hand, Urizen being torn from Los’s side renders Urizen unrecognizable and leads to the next event, wherein Los chains Urizen up to prevent him from causing harm but only triggering him to be more angry in his conducts upon escape. On the other hand, if Urizen were to rhetorically represent reason and Los art and imagination, their separation is a metaphor for the real-life distancing of reason and imagination caused by the reign of Empiricism, which Blake opposes time and again. This disconnection is forced – “Urizen was rent from [Los’s] side” and subsequently “from Eternity” – and its effects are long-lasting and disastrous for the both of them (Urizen 74). Los is “in anguish,” “groaning! gnashing! groaning!” upon the separation, or rather severance, from Urizen (Urizen 74). However, while the wrenching did heal for him, it never did for Urizen, who lay as an unrecognizable “clod of clay” “in a dreamless night” (Urizen 74). The separation between Reason and Imagination, to Blake, is also an
involuntary event which leaves both sides damaged, though more harm seems to lie with Reason than with Imagination. Similarly, Enitharmon, representing Pity, is separated from Los as a trembling, petrified “globe of blood” that grows into a human form (Urizen 78). When compared with the creation of the first female in the Bible, Eva, Enitharmon’s birth is not so natural or deliberate – instead, it comes with fear and even gruesomeness: “In anguish dividing & dividing/For pity divides the soul” (Blake 77). Blake portrays all of these separations as forced and painful for the parties involved, yet there is a sense that they have to happen for the myth to take shape, unlike in the Bible where division and compartmentalization need and should happen. Instead of negating dualism completely in his own myth, Blake chooses to take on the torment of ripping apart unities to reveal the hypocrisy of the Christian conception of the world. His involuntary dualism decries a reality wherein different kinds of knowledge and people seem to fall naturally into neat dichotomies but are treated unequally under one tyrannical power, who does nothing about the injustice. Separation, then, has to occur to show that true, equal, consummate unity is the ideal state of existence.

Rowland’s assertion that what Blake “took from the Bible was an account not of [...] a completely self-contained individual human person” deserves further scrutiny considering Blake’s concern for and treatment of the body (Rowland 100). The body is significant in thinking about Blake’s monoist or dualist tendencies as it is one side of the body-soul dichotomy that he is trying to deconstruct in both The Marriage and Urizen. In The Marriage, where Blake takes the voice of the Devil and declares his philosophy as the “Bible of Hell”, he considers the body-soul, or Energy-Reason, separation an “Error” dictated by religion, and declares that “1 Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call’d Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses. the chieed inlets of Soul in this age/2 Energy is the only life and is from the Body and
Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy” *(MHH 34).* We can see that, once again, rather than the division between body and soul or Energy and Reason, Blake insists upon a symbiotic existence of the two sides. If the body seems to be the limit for human perception, it is because we have made it so due to our over-reliance on just the five senses, which prohibits the body from access to all the vision that the soul has to offer — visions beyond what the senses can observe, visions of the “infinite.” This he explains later in *The Marriage:* “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite./For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern” *(MHH 39).* A monist argument for unity of soul and body emerges from these declarations, as such a unity would make clear “the doors of perception,” allowing humans to absorb all the knowledge of the world as they should.

Yet, the physicality of the body cannot be disregarded. Erin M. Goss, author of the article “What is Called Corporeal: William Blake and the Question of the Body,” attempts to reconcile these concerns in her analysis of Blake’s treatment of the body and the implications it has for his thoughts on larger social and ontological systems in *The [First] Book of Urizen.* The body, to Goss, represents the “ground of the material world, the condition of possibility for the world’s existence and continuation” *(Goss 415).* This is evident in how Urizen’s existence is marked first with a name, but only truly comes into being after Los has crafted a body for him in hope of stopping him from changing and dividing. His name — a linguistic, rhetorically meaningful item — falls short when trying to define and control Urizen, so Goss asserts that the formation of his physical body is to render him easier to dominate. Yet, this attempt fails as Urizen’s “nervous brain shot branches/Round the branches of his heart” *(Urizen 76).* Reason’s domination over desire within Urizen receives a physical manifestation in this description. Both Urizen’s name
and his body are ontological signs, which demand recognition in order to understand fully his existence, showing a degree of “inseparability” between them (Goss 416). Goss also recognizes Blake’s questioning of the body, of how its physicality “suspends us in epistemology,” potentially limits our understanding of the world, a view he already expresses in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Goss 416). This observation would turn out to be central to her final conclusion, that “Urizen exposes the body as a figurative imposition aimed at concealing and surviving epistemological crisis,” that the body’s materiality serves as a cover for a lack of understanding and knowledge (426).

Blake mirrors the materiality of origin in his own creation myth, exemplified by the formation of Urizen’s body, yet as a satirist questions it. After all, the Biblical Creation is a step-by-step creation of the corporeal world; even if God’s physical form isn’t really described, it is implied in how mankind is crafted after his image. Blake’s complicated relationship with the body’s function as an epistemological sign reflects his relationship with the larger ontological systems of his society. Goss explains his position as “working to collapse the materiality of history with a redemptive ideal for the future, Blake’s cosmology aims to provide both a narrative of the known world and an apocalyptic vision of future possibility” (417). To the extent that *Urizen* is a parody of the Biblical account of creation, it also seriously attempts to reconfigure our understanding of origin. To give shape to such an elusive entity as Urizen is, rhetorically, to attempt to assign meaning to creation; however, the act of narrating genesis is futile in that it, by its very nature, defies a concrete definition (Goss 419). Goss acknowledges Blake’s complex position as he “stages the difficulty of establishing an understanding of origin as anything other than arbitrary imposition” instead of merely proposing a more hopeful, unified creation (Goss 417). Indeed, creation is arbitrarily impositional in its placement of occurrences;
some events just have to happen for the myth in particular and the world in general to move forward. We see this in Blake’s mingled juxtaposition between monoism and dualism: while body and soul are and should be one, the body has to be formed; while unity is his final goal, separation and division, however enforced and ultimately harmful, have to occur. The world, as corporeal, is itself separated from disembodied Eternity upon the realization of the first physiologically generated humans (Goss 418). There is an inherent separation behind the forming of the corporeal itself, which Urizen as a commentary on embodiment or a lack thereof “foregrounds the imposed nature of the body as figure, suggesting that the idea of a knowable body emerges only to conceal that which remains unknown and unknowable”. The body in all of its mundane materiality, then, seems little more than an inadequate vessel for ontological means.

Leopold Damrosch Jr., in his chapter “The Problem of Dualism”, addresses directly this complicated interchange between Blake’s ultimate monoism and the dualistic steps he has to take to get there, not only in terms of the body-soul relationship but with other, epistemological, and ontological dichotomies as well. Damrosch observes Blake’s position to be “a dualism that denies itself to be such by constantly defining one half of the duality out of existence” (168). This would be the case with the relationship between Reason and Imagination that Blake opposes, in which Empiricism denies the validity of imagination and desire and espouses only the potentiality of the five senses. Damrosch argues that Blake is also doing this in trying to put forward his own monoistic stance, embedded in the repeated declaration “Every thing that lives is Holy” (MHH 45). For the statement to be true it requires a validation of being “holy” — and this follows, to the extent that being holy is not, to Blake, a “wholly other” but a state intricately connected to “mundane” life (Damrosch 169). Dualism is both a vehicle and an “inevitable consequence” of Blake’s philosophical position, even if he himself wants to reject it. Similarly to
Goss’s discussion, Damrosch also addresses that Blake is particularly attached to the human form as it reflects the universe — the higher corporeal (174). As much as he wants body and soul to become one, they are “imaginatively distinct” (Damrosch 170). It should be noted that this complex mix of dualism and monoism is “inevitable” as Damrosch calls it; it is not that Blake is confused in his own thoughts, but that anything simpler would undermine the very nature of what he is trying to argue for (Damrosch 175). The foundation of the Western tradition, the Bible, is constructed upon seemingly clear-cut, essential dichotomous relationships: God-man, man-woman, which have been interpreted to convey other such dichotomies such as Reason-Desire or body-soul. Blake endeavors to battle those simplistic views using his own complexity.

It is also important to remember that Blake is a satirist, and so whenever there seems to be self-contradiction in his work, it may be because he is juggling both the criticism of an issue and the lack of resolution for it. Such is the case with his oft-quoted statement in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence” (*MHH* 34). As Damrosch asserts, “none is more problematic [than this statement]” (176). Here Blake is acknowledging these dualities, declaring them vital to “progression.” At the same time, this meaning seems to contradict his stance for unity and monoism, which we have seen in previous analyses. However, as Damrosch points out, for Blake it is not so much about the harmony of opposites but the recognition that “an inescapable experience of pain and struggle is fundamental to any achievement” (177). As we’ve noted with the aforementioned examples of painful separation and fragmentation in *The [First] Book of Urizen*, dualistic struggle is not necessarily desired, but still necessary, in Blake’s conception of the fallen world. Furthermore, it is “contraries” that he wants, an acknowledgement of dualistic existence, but not “otherness” wherein one side is
alienated from being granted value (Damrosch 179). The lines from *The Marriage* also raise the question: which is Blake’s ultimate goal, unity or progression? Progression is desired, but it is not the way Blake’s main ontological riddles would be won. Unity, a true unity that recognizes differences instead of glossing over them, will pull together opposites in equal measures (Damrosch 179).

The ambiguity of Blake’s sense of monoism versus dualism also applies to the reflections of himself and his artistic enterprise in both the speaker of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Los, the “Eternal Prophet” and artist of *Urizen*. *The Marriage* shows an artist who is expressive and open about embracing the fires of Hell—ideas that defy Biblical divided notions of body and soul—and putting them into his work. He can do this quite literally “by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid” (*MHH* 39). On the one hand, the speaker is doing his job as an engraver, working with metal and fire; rhetorically he is using these modes of Hell to “cleanse the door of perception” for people, clearing off the “infinity” that has been obstructed from their eyes by empiricism. In *The [First] Book of Urizen*, Los, also an alternate personae for Blake, comes off as much less optimistic about the effectiveness of his art. Rowland explains that the connection between Los and Blake lies in “Los’s creativity, his ambivalence with regard to revolutionary energy, and the restriction of the effects of abstractedness” (100). Los tries to form “nets and gins” to control Urizen yet inside is feeling a pity so immense that it separates his soul (*Urizen* 74). This speaks to the dividedness and doubt within Los’s own enterprise, from which he cannot seem to escape. By existing and making art he is creating a division between ideas and choosing some over others—however, he has to for his work to have any meaning at
all. The artist's work may not be futile, but in order to complete it he has to alienate himself from Eternity and accept all the struggles and pain that entail.

William Blake's dualistic unity is embedded in his overall advocacy for connectedness within one being and between one and other, and his recognition of the dualism necessary for this effort. While separation and fragmentation in his myth are hurtful and ultimately detrimental to all sides, they are necessary for creation to happen and for the world to go on. This, at least, is a more self-conscious realization than that of the Biblical account of creation, which involves a natural process of categorizing and compartmentalizing of all beings by a benevolent God. A holistic look at the different ways that Blake approaches monoism through dualism, from his satire of the conventional interpretation of the Bible to his ambiguous relationship with the body, materiality, and larger ontological and epistemological systems influencing his world, gives us access to his complex position. This complicated philosophy is, by its very complexity, a response to the simplicity of orthodox knowledge. In this process, Blake also acknowledges the potential futility and inherent hardships that he as an artist accepts even if he is to be "rent from Eternity."
Works Cited


